



The rise of covert competitive authoritarianism

Laura Rubidge

OCTOBER EDITION - 'POLITICS MONTH'

Abstract

Globally, democracy is on the decline, threatening the achievability of the landmark Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Digital technologies have enabled new covert competitive authoritarian tactics. Renewed surveillance laws and public and international awareness of these tactics are required to regain the global democratic rights and civil liberties required for Agenda 2030.

Introduction

Worldwide, democracy is under siege (Repucci & Slipowitz 2021). The liberal democratic model hailed by the United Nations as ‘essential for sustainable development’ (United Nations 2021) is in its 15th consecutive year of decline, corresponding with a global decline in individual freedom (Freedom House 2020). This trend makes the Sustainable Development Goals unattainable by their 2030 deadline (Roberts 2021: 17-19). Urgent international action is required to reverse this trend. This article argues that some of the authoritarian tactics employed by incumbent governments are a new form of *covert* competitive authoritarianism enabled by digital technologies. The concept of covert competitive authoritarianism is based on Levitsky and Way’s (2010) concept of competitive authoritarian regimes, which are defined as ‘civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist...but in which incumbents’ abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents’ (Levitsky & Way 2010: 5).

The additional ‘covert’ aspect introduces the idea that the advantage gained is so subtle or well-hidden that the abuse of the state is not noticed; therefore, the state can appear to conform to a liberal democratic regime. The covert nature of these tactics guards them against the pressure of international norms to respect democracy and civil liberty. It will therefore be argued that international recognition, awareness and regulation are required to hinder the employment of these tactics that are undermining the progress of international sustainable development.

Theoretical underpinnings

The concept of competitive authoritarianism was introduced by Levitsky and Way (2010) to describe the hybrid regimes that emerged after the Cold War during the ‘third wave of democratisation’ (Huntington 1991). Levitsky and Way (2010) argued that these hybrid regimes emerged as a result of the changing international environment. Due to the fall of the USSR, the West grew in influence, spreading their liberal democratic model, often through conditionality. Therefore, many states (e.g., Benin, Rwanda, Mozambique) hastily implemented democratic institutions, often with international support, in order to comply with the Western pressure, reaping the cooperative rewards and avoiding geopolitical isolation.

However, elections do not guarantee democracy (Diamond 2002). Fareed Zakaria (1997) highlighted the fundamental differences between liberal and illiberal democracies, arguing

that the new rise in democracies of the 1990s was primarily a rise in illiberal democracies. The liberal democracy is associated with the Western model of democracy, involving both elections and the freedoms associated with constitutional liberalism. These two aspects of a liberal democracy correspond, respectively, with the concepts of political liberties and civil liberties (Zakaria 1997: 23).

Competitive authoritarian regimes have established elections and nominally respect civil liberties, thereby complying with both aspects of liberal democracies outlined by Zakaria (1997). However, their elections are not free and fair, and civil liberties (e.g., freedom of expression and belief, freedom of association and the rule of law) are often violated. This article argues that a new form of covert competitive authoritarianism has been enabled by digital technologies, which allows incumbent governments to gain an unfair advantage over their opposition without public awareness. This secrecy guards the incumbent against international consequences such as isolation or sanctions, frequently associated with anti-democratic and authoritarian tactics.

Evidently, states conform to the international norms to respect human rights, uphold civil liberties and implement democratic institutions because the international cost of ignoring these norms is higher than that of respecting them. The question then becomes: what if incumbents were presented with the opportunity to create the façade of complying with international norms while guarding their seat of power? Technology, and the lack of regulation and awareness, has created this opportunity.

Technological solutionism

Technology has been falsely sold as a solution to many complex problems. It has been argued that the implementation of election technologies can have the effect of 'rapidly leapfrogging to cleaner and more credible elections' (Cheeseman, Lynch & Willis 2018: 1397). Although there are cases where technology has successfully reduced election fraud, there are numerous cases of technology being employed as a red herring while the same techniques of election rigging are employed. For example, in Azerbaijan's 2013 elections (Luhn 2013), the incumbent government launched a phone application with the aim of boosting the democratic credibility and transparency of the elections. The application was supposed to allow users to watch the results in real time, projecting a level of transparency and legitimacy. However, users were able to see the results of the election before the polls opened; thus, it was clear that the election results were chosen by the government before the voting began. Essentially, the government attempted to implement technology with the purpose of hiding, or drawing attention away from, their election fraud (Cheeseman & Klaas 2018: 7).

Digital surveillance and censorship

Among the new covert competitive authoritarian tactics enabled through digital technology are online surveillance and censorship. There are numerous examples of surveillance technology firms providing states with the technology to monitor and censor the critical voices online. SmartFilter, for example, is a software package designed to hide the filtering from Internet users. Instead of highlighting that some content has purposefully been blocked or censored, SmartFilter displays a '403 Forbidden' error message when a filtered site is opened. This technique was used by the Tunisian government, which altered the error message to a standard "404 File Not Found" message, further concealing the fact that the requested site had been actively blocked (Open Net Initiative 2009: 4).

Even if the government is not actively censoring, monitoring the online information space can hinder a citizen's democratic right to freedom of expression. Government surveillance can create 'cultures of self-censorship' (Nanfuka 2021: 97). For example, the announcement by the Ugandan security minister that the government would initiate social media monitoring and arrest government critics in Uganda through online surveillance resulted in the curtailing of the critical voices and promoted self-censorship among media and government critics (Amnesty International 2014; Nanfuka 2021: 99).

A report by Roberts (2021) highlights the large investments in new surveillance technologies many African governments have recently made. In addition, they have passed laws that expand their legal surveillance powers, which has resulted in an alarming expansion of state surveillance of journalists, judges, business rivals and opposition leaders. Notably, the report concludes that 'legislation alone is insufficient'; public awareness about privacy rights and the illegitimate surveillance practices is required to mobilise the political will to hold the government accountable in law (Roberts 2021: 5). This can be done, for example, through public access reports by investigative journalists such as the Pandora Papers (ICIJ 2021), which expose covert activities of actors, including governments.

Micro-targeting and computational propaganda

The government can also manipulate the electorate's behaviour through misinformation, micro-targeting and computational propaganda. The Cambridge Analytica scandal demonstrated that micro-targeting and computational propaganda are capable of influencing certain voters. For example, former Cambridge Analytica employee Christopher Wylie explained that in order to boost right-wing voter turnout, certain homophobic messages were sent to users profiled into that category (Hern 2018). Diversity within a society has been exploited through misinformation and micro-targeting.

Divisions between diverse groups might cause higher susceptibility to the use and effectiveness of these covert competitive authoritarian tactics. A correlation between ethnoreligious tensions and targeted misinformation and propaganda has been highlighted by a few scholars. For example, during Nigeria's 2015 elections, computational propaganda was used to spread misinformation and ethnoreligious tensions, primarily between Christian and Muslim identities, to influence the elections (Okolie et al. 2021). Similar ethnic divides were exploited through misinformation and propaganda in Sierra Leone (Hansrod 2017).

Recently, Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee turned whistle-blower, testified before the United States Congress, asserting that Facebook has chosen profits over people. She further stated that internal Facebook reports have demonstrated the harmful impact that content shared on the platform has had on children and democracy by spreading inaccurate and divisive information (Jackson 2021).

A report by Alexis Madrigal (2017) further considers this phenomenon, questioning 'what Facebook did to American democracy'. The report considers both the 2012 and 2016 American general elections and concludes that social media has destabilised the electoral system by altering the information the electorate sees and the events they think happened.

Conclusion

The pressure created by the international norms of respect for liberal democratic values and civil liberties has been demonstrated frequently. The fact that even infamous electoral autocrats such as Vladimir Putin, Robert Mugabe, and Alexander Lukashenko have invited international election observers is a testament to the influence of these norms. Even these heads of states consider it valuable to gain international acceptance of their elections as credible and legitimate (Hyde 2011). The current conundrum is that technology has enabled incumbent governments to employ competitive authoritarian tactics to gain an unfair advantage covertly, without any awareness by the domestic or international community.

This article has argued that the concerning global decline in individual freedom is partially the result of a rise in covert competitive authoritarianism, which new digital and surveillance technologies enable. Technology allows many of these tactics to be employed without the knowledge of the domestic and international community, and therefore, they are largely immune to the influence of international norms. Concurring with Roberts (2021), although more comprehensive surveillance laws are required, this alone is insufficient; increased public awareness and activism are also required.

References

Cheeseman, N., Lynch, G. & Willis, J. 2018. Digital dilemmas: the unintended consequences of election technology. *Democratization*, 25(8):1397–1418.

Cheeseman, N. & Klaas, B. 2018. *How to rig an election*. London: Yale University Press.

Diamond, L. 2002. Elections without democracy: Thinking about hybrid regimes. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2): 21–35.

Freedom House. 2020. A leaderless struggle for democracy. Internet: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>. Access: 7 October 2021.

Hansrod, Z. 2017. How media and ethnic politics intertwine in Africa. Internet: <http://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20170917-How-media-and-ethnic-politics-intertwine-Africa>. Access: 7 October 2021.

Hern, A. 2018. Cambridge Analytics: how did it turn clicks into votes? Internet: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/06/cambridge-analytica-how-turn-clicks-into-votes-christopher-wylie>. Access: 8 November 2021.

Huntington, S.P. 1991. Democracy's third wave. *Journal of Democracy*, 2(2): 12–34.

Hyde, S. 2011. *The pseudo-democrat's dilemma: Why election observation became an international norm*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

ICIJ. 2021. Pandora Papers. Internet: <https://www.icij.org/investigations/pandora-papers/global-investigation-tax-havens-offshore/>. Access: 8 November 2021.

Jackson, L. 2021. How should we limit Facebook's power? Internet: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/08/podcasts/facebook-regulation.html>. Access: 25 October 2021.

Levitsky, S. & Way, L. 2010. *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Luhn, A. 2013. Azerbaijan releases election results...before the polls even open. Internet: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/azerbaijan-releases-election-results-polls-even-open-8869732.html>. Access: 5 November 2021.

Madrigal, A. 2017. What Facebook did to American democracy. Internet: <https://www.cs.yale.edu/homes/jf/MadrigalFeb2018-2.pdf>. Access: 8 November 2021.

Nanfuka, J. 2021. Uganda digital rights landscape report. In *Digital rights in closing civic space: Lessons from ten African countries*, edited by T. Roberts. Institute of Development Studies.

Okolie, A.M., Enyiazu, C. & Nnamani, K.E. 2021. Campaign propaganda, electoral outcome and the dynamics of governance in the post-2015 presidential election in Nigeria. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 7(1).

Open Net Initiative. 2009 Tunisia. Internet: <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/protecting-political-campaigns-from-digital-threats.pdf>. Access: 2 October 2021.

United Nations. 2021. Democracy. Internet: <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/democracy>. Access: 24 October 2021.

Repucci, S. & Slipowitz, A. 2021. Democracy under siege. Internet: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>. Access: 4 November 2021.

Roberts, T. 2021. *Digital rights in closing civic space: Lessons from ten African countries*. Institute for Development Studies.

Zakaria, F. 1997. The rise of illiberal democracy. *Foreign Affairs*, 76(6): 22–43.